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A

VINDICATION

OF THE

DISSENTERS IN OXFORD,

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS;

IN REPLY TO

DR. TATHAM'S SERMON,

LATELY PUBLISHED,

AFTER HAVING BEEN PREACHED IN OXFORD
MANY SUNDAYS SUCCESSIVELY.

By *JAMES HINTON.*

THE SECOND EDITION.

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TO THE
INHABITANTS
OF THE
CITY OF OXFORD.

FELLOW CITIZENS,

IT is with much reluctance I address you on a subject which has the appearance of controversy.

Having long resided here in the peaceable character of a Teacher of Christianity, to discharge well the duties of that character has ever been my highest ambition. During my connection with the congregation of Protestant Dissenters in this city, their conduct has merited my gratitude and esteem: but not only to the Dissenters am I indebted; an acquaintance with some respectable members of the University, and with many of the citizens who are members of the establishment, has added not a little to the comfort of my life.—In

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these circumstances, I have ever thought it my duty, and my interest, to seek "the PEACE of the city where I dwell;" nor will I, *knowingly*, suffer any consideration to hide so desirable an object from my view. The unmerited reflections on Dissenters in general, and on those in Oxford in particular, so lately addressed to you repeatedly from the pulpit, and at length from the press, by the Rector of Lincoln College, naturally demand *some* public notice; but my sincere aim in this address, is, to banish from this city, that spirit of contention to which his Sermon has unfortunately given rise.

When this Sermon was first preached, I heard of it without emotion: being delivered before the University, I had too high an opinion of the learning and good sense of Dr. T.'s hearers, to imagine it would produce in their minds, the least effect unfavourable to the Dissenters; and I am happy to observe that it appears unattended with any sanction from them. The next Sunday it was repeated to a numerous audience at the city church; and though highly censured by a great part of the congregation, its effects on many were such as no peaceful man wishes, viz. "*malice, hatred, and evil speaking.*"

Having in the course of the two following days heard various reports about this Discourse, all describing it as casting unjust censures on the Dissenters, and wishing for more direct information, after consulting several of my friends, I wrote the following letter, and sent it to Lincoln College on Tuesday evening:

“ REVEREND

“ REVEREND SIR,

“ THE principal members of the Dissenting Congregation in this city think themselves much aggrieved by some passages in your Sermon of last Lord’s day morning. As their Minister, I think myself bound to espouse their cause, so far as it is consistent with truth and justice.—We do not imagine that a gentleman of your exalted station could wilfully misrepresent either our religious or our political tenets. If however the misrepresentation has arisen from an imperfect knowledge of them, we are not the less sufferers on that account. We think it necessary to request that we may be favoured with the Sermon referred to in a more permanent form. If there be no objection to its publication, it will give us pleasure. Or if any other method can be adopted of communicating to us that part of it only which relates to the Dissenters in Oxford, we are content. It may be that we have formed mistaken apprehensions of the Discourse; in this case the mistake will be candidly acknowledged. If on the other hand our present opinion of it be confirmed, we may perhaps judge it worthy of farther notice: nothing hostile is however intended, but merely a calm vindication of ourselves. Should you, reverend Sir, be induced to treat us with that respect which we always think due to members of the establishment, we leave it to you to point out any method in which this misunderstanding may be amicably removed; our sentiments and conduct set in a just light; and that peace with our fellow citizens which we have long enjoyed, preserved entire. You will pardon

the liberty I have taken in thus addressing you, and believe that, had I known any method of communicating these sentiments more unexceptionable, I would gladly have embraced it.

“ I am with due respect,

“ Reverend Sir,

Queen-street,
Nov. 27, 1792.

“ Your most humble servant,

“ JAMES HINTON.”

The Rev. Dr. Tatham,
Rector of Lincoln-
College.

The next day a gentleman of the College very politely waited on me with the following answer :

Lincoln College, Nov. 28, 1792.

“ Dr. TATHAM presents his compliments to Mr. HINTON, acknowledging the receipt of his kind letter, and assuring him that he had no personal aim in the Sermon of which he speaks, or intent to injure any class of men ; his sole object being to stop the spreading of disaffection and irreligion in these licentious times, and to promote the fear of God, and the honour of the King. If Mr. HINTON be one of those religious teachers who is duly qualified for his high office ; who inculcates love, and joy, and peace, and loyalty ; and who teaches the genuine doctrines of a holy faith, as a good subject and a sound Christian, he wishes him success in his vocation. He is not one of those teachers of whom Dr. T.
warned

warned his hearers. Many others have requested the publication of the Sermon, and Mr. HINTON shall have a copy presented to him."

Rev. Mr. HINTON, Queen-street.

I received this note with pleasure, as it indicated some disposition to peace; but as its contents were not perfectly satisfactory, and I was desirous to bring the business to a speedy and amicable conclusion, I called at College early on Thursday morning, and left the following note for the gentleman who had the care of publishing the Sermon:

" Mr. HINTON presents his compliments to Mr. B. is sorry that the absence of Dr. T. should prevent his immediately thanking him for his obliging note of yesterday. He must however beg of Mr. B. to communicate to the Doctor the following answer, previous to the publication of his Discourse. Mr. H. would think it extremely improper to say for himself, that, as a Christian and a Minister, he possesses all those qualifications which Dr. T. candidly supposes may fall to his share; yet he hesitates not to say, that on doctrinal points he varies little from the Church of England, and that in his public labours he inculcates love, and peace, and loyalty. As to other qualifications, having resided and statedly preached in Oxford nearly six years, he believes all reasonable satisfaction on this head may be derived from respectable members of the University, as well as from the general opinion of the citizens. He therefore submits to the candour of Dr. T. whether he might not in

a note, annexed to his Sermon, exculpate the Dissenters in Oxford, as well as many others, from charges of which they are entirely innocent. This is the rather desired, as the lower orders of people here have already begun to make particular application of a general censure. And this will still necessarily be the case with the multitude, if no distinction be pointed out to them:—their prejudices are soon raised, and their knowledge being confined to their own neighbourhood, it is here they will vent all their dislike: and thus Dr. T. who doubtless wishes equally with us to promote “love and peace, and the fear of God,” may be the undesigning instrument of spreading a spirit of hatred and contention, which produceth every evil work.

“Queen-street, Nov. 29th, 1792.”

To this note I received no answer, though I am assured it was communicated in due time. The Sermon was preached in a different part of the city the next Sunday, and the following Wednesday I received a printed copy of it from Dr. T. without even an acknowledgment of my last note. An apology might be necessary for thus particularly noticing circumstances which appear trifling, were it not that I hope this statement will discover to my fellow citizens, more clearly than I could do it by any other method, how much the Dissenters in this city wish “*to live PEACEABLY with ALL men.*” Had the same spirit actuated the gentleman who has so unguardedly censured them, the public had never been *honoured* with his Sermon, or troubled with this reply.

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The Sermon, as now given to the public, is an unqualified censure of the Oxford Dissenters; it contains an unprovoked attack on the *ability* and *integrity* of their teachers, and is directly calculated to bring upon their congregation the odium of their neighbours, by representing them as a people full of error and enthusiasm in religion; deficient in the duties of morality; and remarkable for their disaffection to the present Government. To a candid examination of these charges I must beg the attention of all who have either read or heard the Sermon of Dr. T.

It may be necessary, however, first, to pay some attention to that part of the Discourse which has the appearance of reasoning, and is made the ground-work of the whole. It commences with a just assertion of the full right of all mankind to judge for themselves in matters of religion. "The Divine Author of the Christian Religion," says Dr. T. (p. 3.) "challenged his Jewish hearers to the exercise of their understandings in its first reception; and his illustrious Apostle PAUL has given a command to Christians in general, to prove all things, and to hold fast that which is good." This sentiment is highly grateful to every lover of truth; but we immediately lose sight of what we so much prize, and our enquiry is abruptly turned from the word of God, to the ability and integrity of those who profess to explain it. Thus Dr. T. represents "a second-hand information as the proper soil of the Christian faith;" (p. 5.) and that "in matters of the last importance to their salvation, in which they must depend

“pend on the ability and integrity of others, the great
 “and general duty of Christians at large, is to judge for
 “themselves of these qualities in their teachers, by those
 “means of judgment which they possess.” (p. 5.) As
 a reason for thus changing the object of our enquiry, we
 are referred (p. 4.) to those words of the Apostle John:
 “Great is the mystery of godliness, &c.” Dr. T.
 adds, “The book in which these mysteries are disclosed
 “to men, is a book of great antiquity, of supernatural
 “authority, written in learned languages, and in a style
 “in many parts almost as mysterious as the subjects of
 “which it treats.” From hence he infers, that “in
 “matters of such deep concern, and difficult enquiry,
 “those who are employed in the lower, but useful offices
 “of life, should be content to receive religious instruc-
 “tion from others,” &c.

Such endeavours to keep the *people* in ignorance, and
 to persuade them to resign their consciences implicitly
 to their spiritual guides, might have been successful in
 the dark ages of popery; but a Protestant Divine, at
 the close of the eighteenth century, cannot surely ex-
 pect that we should pay any deference to such advice.

The supernatural authority of the Bible all Christians
 allow; but is it credible that *because* it is a revelation from
 God to ALL mankind, it is *therefore* unintelligible to the
 GREATER PART of men? Reasonable men would argue
 the direct contrary; and, accordingly, the *plainness* of
 all the more important parts of its instructions, and their
 suitability to all ranks in life, are justly urged in favour
 of its universal authority. As much of the Bible (espe-
 cially

cially of the New Testament) consists of VERY PLAIN instructions, so the style of those parts is remarkably easy and familiar. Our Lord, it is well known, preached chiefly to the *common people*; his sermons abound with plain, yet beautiful similitudes, by which the sublimest truths are rendered familiar to the lowest understanding, and yet retain all their native dignity. With great pleasure I once heard the late excellent Bishop HORNE, in the city pulpit (from which Dr. T. delivered his Sermon), argue the superiority of the Christian Religion, from its being so plain, that even a child might understand it.

Similar observations apply to the difficulty of understanding the Scriptures, because "written in learned languages." Learned men of all denominations, who wish to enforce *direct* information and *strong* conviction of their truth and importance, have readily allowed, that to every important purpose of religion our present translation may be fully depended on. The plainest Christian can have no doubt of the genuineness of those Scriptures, which unite to declare, that "who so
" confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall find mercy."

The mystery which attends *some* truths peculiar to the Gospel, seems however to be Dr. T.'s strongest argument for the necessity of implicit faith in the explications of learned men. But can Dr. T. pretend to explain what an Apostle has confessedly left in mystery? May not a plain man, who can read the first chapter of John, believe the Divinity of our Lord as fully and as clearly as the most learned Divine? The doctrine of the

Trinity, as usually received by the orthodox, is with me an important article of the Christian Faith; yet I cannot help thinking with Dr. JEREMY TAYLOR, "That he who goes about to speak of the mystery of the Trinity, and does it by words and names of man's invention, talketh of *essences* and *existences*, *hypostases* and *personalities*, *priorities* and *co-equalities*, &c. may amuse himself, and build a tabernacle in his head, and talk something he knows not what: But the good man, that feels the power of the FATHER, and to whom the SON is become wisdom, sanctification, and redemption; in whose heart the love of the SPIRIT of GOD is shed abroad—this man, though he understands nothing of what is unintelligible, yet he alone truly understands the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity."

I hope enough has been said to prove, that every man able to read (and I wish there were not one in this country unable) should *personally* obey the command of Christ, and search the Scriptures with diligence and perseverance, relying on Him who hath promised his Spirit to "direct our hearts into the love of God," and to render the way of holiness so plain, that "wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein." The qualifications of those who teach Christianity would then be secondary, though by no means unimportant considerations. To enable us to judge rightly of these qualifications, a knowledge of the Scriptures is absolutely necessary. If "the word of Christ dwell in us richly in all wisdom," we shall be able to try the spirit of our teachers, whether it be

be of God. "To the law and to the testimony, if they speak not according to *this word*, it is because there is no light in them."—But the system of Dr. T. is in this respect essentially deficient:—If Ministers are to be tried, must it not be by some SUPERIOR authority? but how shall this be, when that authority itself is by them made to speak just what they direct?—Moreover, Were it true that learning constituted the chief ability of a Gospel Minister, the common people would be evidently more at a loss to judge of this qualification, than they are of the meaning of most parts of an English Bible. A course of attendance at an academy or university, is not always a decisive testimony of great learning. To pursue Dr. T.'s own comparison:—We see numbers remarkable for their knowledge, activity, and success in business, who never served a regular apprenticeship to the trade they follow; while many who have plodded through their seven years instruction, remain in ignorance all their lives. But could the justice of our claims to learning be fixed with ease and precision, how could Dr. T.'s principle be admitted? One LEARNED man would advise us almost, if not entirely, to neglect public and social prayer; another LEARNED man would recommend Socinianism; a third enforces sentiments esteemed orthodox:—which of these shall we follow? The command returns, "Search the Scriptures;" let these determine. We have the promise of Heaven, that a sincere enquirer after truth shall be "taught of God" to avoid fatal mistakes; but if we forsake these fountains of truth, and depend on "*second-hand information*," our difficulties must increase, and the promise of Divine assistance becomes entirely frustrated.

As a Divine of the church of England, Dr. T. should at least have recollected, that THAT Church, as well as Dissenters, considers as absolutely necessary to a Christian Minister, one qualification which I may be allowed to call EXPERIMENTAL PIETY. He well knows, that every Candidate for the Ministry in the Establishment, solemnly declares his *trust that he is* MOVED BY THE HOLY GHOST *to take this office upon him.* A declaration which, if made by Members of any other community, would probably not have escaped the Doctor's censure as enthusiastic: nevertheless, I cannot but think, every Minister of the Gospel ought to be able to make such a declaration, with the utmost sincerity, in the sight of God. The best, perhaps the only, means by which this piety of heart can be discovered to others, is a strict conformity to the character of a Christian Minister, as described by the Apostle PAUL, 1 Tim. chap. 3. He must be—"Blameless, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach, not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous," &c. For a want of personal religion, or unblemished morals, no abilities natural, or acquired, can atone, or compensate. Nevertheless, a good natural understanding improved by suitable education must be acknowledged as not only desirable, but necessary, to the honourable and useful discharge of the sacred office.

The Dissenters, aware that learning is an excellent assistant in the Ministry, though it cannot supersede the authority of Scripture, always promote the education of pious and intelligent young men for sacred service; and perhaps, taken as a body, possess, in proportion to their

numbers, as many learned men as ANY other community. We profess with Dr. T. that the people ought to judge for themselves of the qualifications of their teachers ; and Dissenting Congregations *only* have the full enjoyment of this privilege. In this freedom of choice they glory, and to this their Ministers cheerfully appeal, even in Oxford ; where, as Dr. T. asserts, the inhabitants have the very best opportunities to judge of their pretensions.

In pages 10 and 11, after telling us, with much gravity, that an academic education is as necessary to the office of the Ministry, as an apprenticeship is to the exercise of a trade, he says, “ This rule is of easy and obvious
 “ application ; and it is with amazement and concern
 “ that we see it so much neglected and overlooked by
 “ the inhabitants of this place, where, of all others, it
 “ is the most obvious. They enjoy a singular opportunity of judging for themselves, by being eye-witnesses
 “ of the many years we devote to deep and important
 “ studies, &c. But notwithstanding these opportunities of
 “ trying us by this rule, and notwithstanding there are
 “ more than a dozen parish churches built by the piety
 “ of their forefathers, in which we are ready to instruct
 “ them to the utmost of our power ; we see many of
 “ them led away with the wildest infatuation, and with
 “ itching ears, by ignorant and itinerant preachers of
 “ every denomination ; by Methodists and Enthusiasts,
 “ by Anabaptists and Dissenters, of whose learning and
 “ abilities they have not had the smallest proof ; men
 “ who are self-taught without the power, and self-ordained without even the appearance, of learning ; men
 “ out of the meanest professions and lowest occupations
 “ of

“ of life, whom if they had a fair opportunity of trying,
 “ they would find more ignorant and unqualified than
 “ themselves—*Blind leaders of the blind !*”

This is not the least remarkable passage in this remarkable Discourse ; whether we consider the justness of the information it conveys to the public, respecting the number of those in Oxford who dissent from the established worship ; the accuracy with which their different denominations are described ; or the meekness and charity with which they are treated.

From the concern and amazement which the Doctor feels, and the grievous lamentations he has uttered respecting teachers of every denomination, one would suppose that the number of Dissenting and Methodist Chapels IN THIS CITY, at least equalled that of the Parish Churches ; and that the latter having lost the greatest part of their congregations, were likely soon to become entirely useless. Let not the Doctor's representation however excite the least alarm : the plain truth is, that excepting a Quaker's Meeting-house, which is seldom used, there are in Oxford only two places where the form of worship differs from that of the establishment ; one of them belongs to a society of Protestant Dissenters which has existed more than a century ; the other to the followers of the late Mr. WESLEY. These two are multiplied by the Doctor into numbers unknown, of Methodists and Enthusiasts, Anabaptists and Dissenters. No wonder such a crowd of fancied beings pressing on the Doctor's mind, should produce confusion, inaccuracy, and inconsistency. Distinct from the Methodists, I know of no religious professors, at least

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in Oxford, who are ever charged with enthusiasm; and to them, perhaps, the charge does not of right belong.

The Baptists are well known to be one of the three denominations which constitute the body of Dissenters in this kingdom: their mode of baptism, by immersion, the Church of England cannot censure, seeing she *enjoins* it. As to the subject, whether infant or adult, they freely allow, what they justly claim, the right of following the dictates of conscience. The people with whom I am connected, give constant proof of their mutual candour, by a free communion at the Lord's table of Baptists and Pædobaptists. We are occasionally joined in our worship by some pious Methodists, of orthodox sentiments, who are in the communion of the Church of England. When Ministers of their acquaintance visit Oxford, we are happy in receiving their instructions. These are in general men whose character renders them highly worthy of esteem. Some of them have been educated in the University, and their sentiments are in every respect those of the Church of England. If in the pulpit they sometimes lay aside the scholar, and assume plainness of speech, they do it with the most upright views; and Dr. T. is the last Divine that should censure them for doing it.

Though no way connected with the followers of the late Mr. WESLEY, I cherish for them a friendly regard; because they are *pious* and *peaceable* in their deportment, and zealously attached to the KING and CONSTITUTION.

There is a part of the Doctor's censure which *must*
appear

appear to have direct allusion to the Author of this Reply, as a Baptist, and the ONLY Dissenting Minister in Oxford. He expressly says, "*Many (i. e. of Oxford) are led away by Anabaptists and Dissenters, of whose learning and abilities they have not had the smallest proof; who are self-taught without the power, and self-ordained without even the appearance, of learning.*" As the person thus injured is the Minister of a reputable congregation, and is intrusted by many respectable families in this city with the education of their sons, justice to himself and friends demands some reply.

He appeals to those whose candour has induced them occasionally to attend his public instructions, or to commit to his care the education of their children, whether he has taken advantage of these circumstances to promote, in any degree, the purposes of party. Accessions to his congregation from the Church of England have been few and unsolicited; the result, no doubt, of full conviction, being in most cases opposed by temporal interest.

Leaving Dr. T. to explain how a man can be self-taught "without the power of learning," it may be necessary just to add, that the Dissenting Minister in this city was neither "self-taught" nor "self-ordained;" his own industry, he hopes, has not been wanting in acquiring useful learning; but much more ought to be attributed to his worthy and well-known tutors, under whom he passed through the usual studies preparatory to the Ministry in the Academy at Bristol. With respect to learning, he presumes not to boast; he wishes to devote whatever of it he possesses to the cause of religion, and particularly to ~~the~~ interests of that society with
which

which he is connected. Over this people he was publicly ordained in the year 1788, in which service the late Dr. EVANS, Dr. STENNETT, and D. TURNER, A. M. principally assisted. Here what relates to the writer personally should close ; but he wishes to embrace this opportunity of expressing his regret on behalf of learning, that by his situation he is doomed to behold magnificent libraries without the liberty of access to them. Those of Dissenting Academies are not thus confined. He flatters himself there are not wanting in this University those who need only to see the complaint stated, to induce them to remove it.

I request the patience of my readers, while I take the liberty to assert, that the Dissenters in Oxford, as well as most of their brethren, are orthodox in their religious principles, and like the generality of Dissenters, moral in their lives, and FIRMLY ATTACHED to the KING and CONSTITUTION. They do not indeed, like Dr. T. in his Sermon, *confine* Christian morality to the love of their country, nor to that *joy* which *plenteousness* in houses and palaces may inspire. The *love* of our country is a great virtue ; and *plenty* is a blessing of Providence ; but thousands possess both, who know nothing of *love* and *joy* as *fruits of the Spirit*, which the Apostle tells us, in the next verse, belong only to those “ that are Christ’s, and have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts.” Is it not much to be lamented, that *learned* Christian teachers should thus overlook the obvious meaning of the New Testament ? We as Dissenters wish not to boast of superior sanctity, yet exert our endeavours to banish immorality from our societies, and

to maintain the spirit and practice of Christian obedience in the whole of our lives. The regularity of our conduct, it is well known, is frequently urged against us as matter of reproach.

In the 16th and 17th pages of his Sermon, the Doctor declaims much on the errors of Socinians. He may find Socinians in the Church as well as out of it. Let their sentiments be combated by rational and scriptural arguments, and may success attend all who engage in such a cause! But let persecution in all its forms be avoided. As to the congregation to which I belong, I can safely say, there is *not* ONE Unitarian, or Socinian among us.

Of the *loyalty* of Dissenters, as a body, this nation has had, and has, many proofs. If a whole community were to participate in the guilt of a disaffected individual, would the University itself be innocent?

It is unwise, as it is unjust, to affirm, that the Church and the State are so connected, that whoever cannot conscientiously enter into the former, must necessarily be disaffected to the latter. The Dissenters of this city challenge their most watchful observers, to produce one instance of their having either disobeyed, or spoken disrespectfully of, the AUTHORITY of PARLIAMENT, or of the power vested by the CONSTITUTION in the hands of the KING.

The public must consider Dr. T. as having charged us with disaffection, as his Sermon was professedly preached with a view to guard *the inhabitants of Oxford* against the dangerous innovations of Dissenters. In

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page 13th, he says, " In spite of artful and treacherous
 " impostors, we feel ourselves a happy nation ; we are
 " united together by the bonds of love, which some dis-
 " affected teachers labour to dissolve ; by the love of our
 " King, whom they labour to despise ; by the love of
 " our country, which they labour to destroy." And in
 page 18th, " These teachers would dissuade you by art-
 " ful and enticing words, both from the fear of God,
 " and the honour of the King." Now, though I hope,
 from Dr. T.'s note to me, that he did not mean to fix
 this charge on the Dissenters in Oxford, yet surely he
 cannot be justified in refusing to intimate to the public,
 in some form or other, that he did not ; and I think we
 have a right to expect, that he should either prove our
 guilt, or acknowledge our innocence.

In contrast with Dr. T.'s insinuations against the
 Dissenters, I beg leave to offer a testimony on their
 behalf from the writings of the late Dr. SHIPLEY,
 Bishop of St. Asaph. Speaking of Dissenting Ministers,
 he says*, " These are men who deserve our esteem for
 " their science, their literature, their critical study of the
 " Scriptures, and their excellent writings, either de-
 " fending or teaching common Christianity ; and they
 " have of late stood forth, almost singly, in defence of
 " the natural, civil, and religious rights of mankind.
 " They have been considered, in the two former reigns,
 " as loyal subjects, and as good citizens ; nor can Ox-
 " ford herself boast of having produced more steady
 " friends to the House of Hanover." Which of these

* Speech in the House of Lords, 1779.

opinions is most consistent with truth, let our conduct determine. While this remains irreproachable, we may claim not only the protection, but the respect due to good citizens.

I shall close my remarks on Dr. T.'s Sermon, by expressing a wish, that ALL Ministers of the Gospel may unite in endeavouring to reclaim those who either never attend Divine Worship at any place, or attend it to very little purpose. In this work there is ample room for all our exertions; and with the Spirit of truth and peace for our guide, we may expect that our labour will not be in vain in the Lord.

Oxford,

JAMES HINTON.

Dec. 8th, 1792.

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P. S. The Dissenters in Oxford being vindicated from the accusations and insinuations contained in Dr. T.'s Sermon; and their ATTACHMENT to the KING and CONSTITUTION being thus PUBLICLY AVOWED; it is hoped that neither the Pulpit nor the Press will any longer be the medium of reproach; or, if they are, that no farther answer to unfounded declamation will be thought necessary by a judicious Public.

1456. i. 74